Finishing What My Parents Started: College Aspirations among EMERGE Students

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HERC Research Brief

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*E*MERGE is a college access program for talented but underserved high school students. EMERGE aims to encourage students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (economically disadvantaged, first-generation college-going, or both) to attend selective colleges and universities since disadvantaged students are prone to academic undermatch—enrolling in a postsecondary institution less selective than their qualifications may allow. In spring 2018, we interviewed 26 high school sophomores recently accepted to EMERGE to understand what factors drove students' college search processes. Through our interviews, we learned that students felt college was essential to a "better life" and thought of it as a way to repay their parents financially and to honor their sacrifices. However, students felt constrained in their college searches, particularly by the cost of college and a sense of obligation to family. Finally, the students we interviewed expressed excitement at their acceptance into EMERGE, describing it as a life-changing opportunity.

Executive Summary

- Students described their families as motivators for attending college, with parents setting college-going expectations early on. Students perceived college-going as a way to give back to their parents for their sacrifices by succeeding academically and taking care of the family financially.

- There was wide variation in who students received college information from (e.g., siblings, extended family, mentors).

- The majority of students mentioned the financial cost of college as the most important factor in their college search processes. Additionally, distance from home was both a financial and emotional consideration in students' college search processes.

- Students were grateful for their acceptance into EMERGE, often describing the program as a life-changing opportunity.

Background

Too often students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (i.e., economically disadvantaged and/or first-generation) attend colleges and universities less selective than their qualifications may allow (Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2011; Roderick, Nagaoka, Coca, & Moeller, 2008; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013). Known as *academic undermatch*, this phenomenon may negatively affect life outcomes for youth since selective college attendance has positive effects on wages (Black & Smith, 2004; Dale & Krueger, 2014; Hoekstra, 2009; Long, 2008). EMERGE is a college access program that aims to address the problem of academic undermatch by preparing talented but underserved high school juniors and seniors to enroll in selective postsecondary institutions. EMERGE provides its students a variety of supports, including, but not limited to, after-school small-group workshops on the college application process, all-expense paid trips to college campuses, and vouchers for standardized test preparation courses.

EMERGE currently operates in three local school districts; for this study, we focused on students enrolled in the Houston Independent School District (HISD).[1] To qualify for the program during the 2018 application cycle[2], students had to be economically disadvantaged or a first-generation college student.[3] Students also had to submit an application, which included information on their academic performance and extracurricular involvement, as well as a personal statement. Only one-in-four applicants to EMERGE (27%) was admitted to the program during the 2018 application cycle.

This brief describes findings from interviews with high-performing high school sophomores from low-socioeconomic backgrounds who applied and were accepted into EMERGE during spring 2018, before any exposure to EMERGE programming. The goal of this study was to understand how students develop college aspirations and search for postsecondary institutions. Understanding students' experiences before entering EMERGE may help the program tailor its programming to better meet student needs. The findings may also aid HISD in their district-wide college advising efforts, particularly with similarly disadvantaged students who may be prone to academic undermatch.

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1   Aside from HISD, EMERGE operates in Spring ISD and Spring Branch ISD.
2   Students submitted their application in spring 2018 for admission into the program, which started fall 2018. EMERGE's application and selection process has since changed. Please contact HISD for details.
3   EMERGE defines first-generation as not having a parent who graduated from a four-year college or university in the United States.

Research Questions

1. What motivates EMERGE students' aspirations to attend colleges?

2. From what sources do EMERGE students receive information about colleges?

3. What factors do EMERGE students consider in their college searches?

4. How do students from EMERGE feel that the program fulfills their needs?

Data and Methods

For this study, we chose four high schools and interviewed newly-admitted EMERGE students, prior to their exposure to the program. Our research team conducted one-on-one interviews with 26 of 37 sampled EMERGE students, as 11 students declined our invitation for interview. We asked students about their motivations to attend college and how they searched for colleges. For the full interview guide, please see Appendix A. For additional information on the data and methods, please see Appendix B.

Table 1 provides a breakdown of the interviewed students' sociodemographic backgrounds and academic performance. We also show statistics on their EMERGE application scores. These scores were used to decide which students were accepted to EMERGE.[4]

Table 1. Characteristics of the Students Interviewed

Variable	Count	Mean	Min	Max
Gender				
Male	10	38%	0	1
Female	16	62%	0	1
Race/Ethnicity				
Black	7	27%	0	1
Hispanic	16	62%	0	1
Asian	3	12%	0	1
Economic Disadvantage				
No	2	8%	0	1
Yes	24	92%	0	1
First-Generation				
No	3	12%	0	1
Yes	23	88%	0	1
GPA	26	4.31	3.87	4.71
PSAT	26	1,081	940	1,250
Application Score	26	96	76	120
Total Students Interviewed	*26*			

Source: EMERGE Application Data, 2018.

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4   Students' applications were awarded up to 125 points. Details on EMERGE's application process may be found in Appendix A of a prior HERC research brief entitled *Who Applies to EMERGE?*, which is available at https://kinder.rice.edu/houston-education-research-consortium.

Results

Research Question #1:
What motivates EMERGE students' aspirations to attend college?

Students described their family as a motivator for attending college, with parents setting college-going expectations early on and students perceiving college-going as a way to honor their parents for their sacrifices by succeeding academically and taking care of their family financially.

EMERGE students' motivations for attending college were tied to their family. For example, when we asked Cassandra[54] when she first began thinking about college, she replied,

> Since I was little, that's always been—that I have to go to college to be successful in life. My parents, they've always told us that we have to go to college. We can't *not* go to college. [Hispanic female]

For students like Cassandra, who expressed a desire to be "successful in life," parents served as motivators who instilled an expectation of college attendance at an early age. Similarly, Jing (Asian male) recalled that his parents started talking to him about college when he was just five years old and Roberto (Hispanic male) said his parents started talking about college when he was in middle school. Vernon, who lived with his grandmother, noted that she often spoke to him about college:

> I've been thinking about [college] my entire life, as far as I can remember. Because my grandma, 'cause I live with my grandma [...] It's always been something that's either at the back of my mind, or mentioned in conversations. We talk about it all the time, at least six days out of the week. [Black male]

Another poignant example of motivation instilled by a parent was when Jacinta described daily conversations with her father about college:

> Well, my dad...Everyday he usually comes home around six, all like burned from the sun, and he's just laying (sic) on the couch and whatnot...And then he always tells me go to college because, "I don't want you to end up like me." [Hispanic female]

Acting as a motivator, Jacinta's father "always" emphasized college-going and stressed that he did not want Jacinta to "end up" like him doing manual labor for a living. These emotionally charged signals from family members were often mentioned as a reason why the students in our sample aspired to attend college. For example, Alicia described her mother's emotional push towards college:

> And my mom, she's like, "I need [you] to be successful so I know I didn't do anything wrong with you." [Black female]

This emotional push from her mother signaled to Alicia to strive for college in order to make her mother proud. Cassandra similarly stated,

> I just wanna (sic) be successful in life, so I can make my parents proud of myself. [Hispanic female]

These signals operated as motivators for college-going. Related to their parents' college-going expectations and wanting to make their parents proud, the students' desires for a "better life" appeared to be another source of motivation orienting them toward college as a pathway to benefit their families. As Morgan stated,

> Just seeing [my parents'] situation and seeing how much they suffer...And just seeing them push like that, considering the fact that they don't have a lot, just makes me say, "Hey, I want to pay my parents back for everything they're doing for me." [Black female]

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5   To protect the confidentiality of our interviewees, all student names used in this brief are pseudonyms.

Another student, Cynthia, described similar motivations related to her mother's setbacks:

> My mom, she wanted to go to college, but, you, know, she had me and my little brother. So she really couldn't finish. And I just wanna (sic), like, finish what she started. [Black female]

Additionally, when we asked Alejandro what motivates him, he described his vision of going to college as a way to financially benefit his family:

> For one, my parents. They've done so much for me, and I want to give...It's not just for me to experience or do something I love, it's also to give back to them. They raised me. I'm going to go here. I'm going to get a good job. I'm going to get a lot of money, and then I'm just going to allow them to retire early. [Hispanic male]

Like Alejandro, Diego also viewed college as a way to support his family financially. He stated:

> Well, I want to go to college because I want to help my parents. Because we don't really have a high income, so I want to help them because they've done so much for me. And I just want to thank—that's going to be my thank you to them. [Hispanic male]

Like many of the students we interviewed, Cassandra, Jing, Roberto, Vernon, Jacinta, Alicia, Morgan, Cynthia, Alejandro, and Diego had motivations related to their family circumstances, which drove their college aspirations and had the ultimate goal of giving back to their parents financially and emotionally.

To achieve their goal of economic security for themselves and their families, students described college as essential to preparing for a successful career. They felt that the surest way to obtain a well-paying job was to attend a reputable college that employers would immediately recognize, or complete a major from a high-quality program that could train them for their intended career. Gloria spelled this out in detail when we asked her why going to a selective college was important to her:

> If I go to this school, I'll know after college I'll be making roughly this figure and I know that if you go to—the better school you go to, then the higher the prestige, therefore the higher the salary ...That's very important to me because I'm trying to—I want to take care of my family. [Hispanic female]

Gloria tied *"prestige"* and *"salary"* to the alleviation of her family's hardships. Not every student used such explicit language, but most students did mention how college attendance was fundamental to helping them get the type of job that would allow them to support their family financially.

Research Question #2:
From what sources do EMERGE students receive information about college?

There was wide variation in who students received information about colleges from (e.g., siblings, extended family, mentors).

Although the students' parents were often emotional resources and encouraged their college-going aspirations, few students described their parents as informational resources (e.g., someone who knew about and could provide advice on college search and application processes). For example, when we asked Emilia to explain why she did not ask her parents for advice about college, she said,

> I would maybe vent to them, but I wouldn't ask them like, "Oh, do you know how to do this?" because I know that they wouldn't. [Hispanic female]

Similarly, Jacinta stated, *"My parents can't help me."* Like Emilia and Jacinta, most students mentioned their parents' lack of college knowledge and experience. While some students like Jacinta felt *"lost"* because they lacked informational resources, others drew from resources beyond their parents. For example, Gloria learned about the college experience by asking for advice from her brother based on his experience:

> Sometimes he's working on his engineering layouts on his laptop, and sometimes I ask him about—how long are your classes? What does it feel like during the day? How do you manage your time? He just tells me—he's honest—he said he'll help me in the future if I ever need help. [Hispanic female]

Gloria described how her brother was an informational resource because he was already in college and helped her to envision what she might expect when she attends college in the future. Jing likewise relied on his older college-attending brother for up-to-date college information:

> I trust my brother a lot. [...] Since he's in college, I think he's a better resource than just adults who've been 30 years out of college or like, "Yeah, you should go here." [Asian male]

Jing suggested that the availability of current information from a trustworthy source was important to him. In addition to general college information, students also discussed financing college with siblings. Cassandra's informational resources on college costs were her siblings who had attended college:

> They tell me if any time I need help or have any questions [about financing college], to ask them because they've already dealt with that stuff. [Hispanic female]

Unlike Gloria, Jing, and Cassandra who went to their siblings for college information, some students relied on extended networks, such as friends of siblings. Vernon described how when thinking about college, he learned about career options through his sister's friends who had already graduated from college:

> Sometime[s] [I talk to] my sister's friends because they all just graduated. One of them is an engineer and I was like, okay, "What do you do as an engineer?" [Black male]

Vernon used his extended network, his sister's friends, as experienced informational resources to inquire about career options after college. These types of informational resources—that some students found in siblings, aunts and uncles, other extended family, or even friends' older siblings—eased students' burden of navigating the unfamiliar college search landscape.

Some students who had no family members with college experience had mentors who recognized their academic potential and proactively provided college guidance. Emilia, for example, who would not reach out to her parents for college advice (for examples, see the quotes above), described how she sought information from non-family resources like a teacher:

> The first person I would go to would be our band teacher, Mr. Richardson [...] The one who tells us the most about [college]...Well, the one who always asks us like, "What's your plan for the future?" is my band teacher, Mr. Richardson. He's always asking us, "What are your plans after?" or "Where do you want to go to college?" [Hispanic female]

Like the band teacher Emilia mentioned, mentors for the other students we interviewed were typically classroom teachers, club or extracurricular advisors, or counselors.

Research Question #3:
What factors do EMERGE students consider in their college searches?

Most students mentioned the financial cost of college as the most important factor in their college search processes.

When asked what they considered in their college search processes, students consistently reported the financial cost of attendance as the most important factor.

The students' families functioned as a double-edged sword: the economic hardships that students experienced within their families motivated them to attend college, while, at the same time, families constrained the options that students believed to be affordable. For example, Javier indicated that college costs would determine whether and where he pursued his postsecondary education:

> If I can't get money to go over there [his dream college] and to stay for four years, then it's no use to me. [Hispanic male]

Nearly all students expressed these financial concerns and many indicated that they were *"on their own"* because they knew that their parents would be unable to pay for college. The prioritization of college affordability displayed by Javier and other students limited their college searches early on, likely making them exclude more selective institutions, setting into motion a series of decisions that might eventually result in academic undermatch.

Distance from home was both a financial and emotional consideration in students' college search processes.

Many students limited their initial college searches to institutions within the Houston metropolitan area or expressed hesitations about attending college away from home. Sometimes students expressed these concerns because they worried that they would be unable to find affordable housing at college, that the cost of traveling back home to visit family would be too high, or that there might be other college-related costs. Alicia, for example, considered a multitude of costs associated with college, including those not part of tuition and fees:

> I considered driving. Dorm. Food. Washing my own clothes. Gas money. Toilet paper. Toothpaste. Toothbrush. Hair products. I've got long hair, so...And then school supplies. I thought about it a lot actually. And then the school books. My mom, she buys her own books now because she doesn't have a scholarship or anything like that. And the books are expensive. [Black female]

Others worried, as Vernon stated simply, about *"Travel expenses."* Vernon and several other students worried that a faraway college would limit their ability to travel home for events and when they were needed. Erica discussed her concern affording holiday travel prices as well as traveling back home when needed:

> Like I said, the distance, because I know some good schools are all the way on this side of the country [...] and I'm just like, "What about Christmas?" So I just have to FaceTime my family. Or what does my Grandma look like again? I just feel like she'll just hate me if I don't go see her, because that's the type of person she is. But my main [concerns] are the prices and the distance, like traveling. [Hispanic female]

Erica additionally worried about affording travel if she needed to visit her sick grandmother, who was suffering from brain cancer:

> If I'm farther away I'll feel helpless, [if] there's no flight and I can't afford the flight. I don't know if I can get back on time. [Hispanic female]

In addition to the potential financial implications of attending college away from home, some students felt that they needed to support their families in-person or mentioned that their parents disapproved of them moving far away. This sense of obligation was particularly strong among the female students we interviewed, illustrated by this quote from Emilia:

> I don't know. I'm probably going to stay in Texas... Because my siblings are here, my family is here. I'm going to go do what I need to do, but I need to be accessible to them. [Hispanic female]

Emilia described an emotional tension between needing to attend the best college that she could and staying nearby in order to be "accessible" in case her family needed her.

Research Question #4:
How do students from EMERGE feel that the program fulfills their needs?
Students were grateful for their acceptance into EMERGE, often describing it as a life-changing opportunity that they perceived would fulfill their need for college guidance and information.

Aware of the obstacles that they had already faced early on in their college searches, many EMERGE students expressed gratitude for their acceptance into the program. Students felt that EMERGE would be able to provide them with opportunities that they might not have otherwise. For example, Jacinta said,

> I like that EMERGE is allowing the opportunity to go to schools that you wouldn't think of because, right now at the moment, if it wasn't for EMERGE I think I'd probably be going to a school that is most convenient for my parents, not necessarily one that I wanted. [Hispanic female]

Students' appreciation for EMERGE was also related to it being the trusted informational resource that they were missing. Morgan expressed this sentiment when she described how she could not rely on family members for college knowledge:

> No one [from my family] ever got into college; [it's] just me and my sisters trying to push and trying to change things for everyone. So I believe the EMERGE program is heaven-sent, literally, to just help me with everything. [Black female]

Similarly, when Jessica discussed her lack of confidence in the college search process, she called EMERGE her *"guiding light."*

Some students mentioned how grateful their parents were for EMERGE. After talking about her parents' rough time emigrating from Mexico to the United States, Kaitlyn said that her parents were *"really glad that there are programs like EMERGE out there"* because they knew how important it was for her to go to college.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Our findings from interviewing newly-admitted EMERGE students have several implications:

- **Incorporate parents and family members in advising initiatives.** Parents are a key part of students' college search processes. Any advising efforts should identify ways to include parents in conversations about students' college aspirations and options to inform them about the application process and discuss the pressures felt by students when choosing a school (e.g., cost, distance). EMERGE should be commended for integrating parents into parts of its curriculum: parents are invited to attend the program's orientation for newly-admitted students, the East Coast college tour, and other events.

- **Use results from the HISD College Advising Survey to match informational resources to students who may need them.** Among the low-income, first-generation students in our sample, there was considerable variation in the family and non-family supports students had available, with many students having no family supports to provide information related to the college search process. Administering a questionnaire like HISD's College Advising Survey early in high school may be used to identify students with fewer informational resources. Matching informational resources at the school-level to students in need of them may reduce constraints on students' initial college searches and help prevent academic undermatch.

- **Share information about need- and merit-based financial aid early and often with students.** Advising efforts with this focus may expand students' college searches. Multiple students we talked with said that the financial cost of college limited their searches. These limits may be removed by sharing information with students about need- and merit-based financial aid early and often. Curriculum about financial aid may be integrated into some of the initiatives HISD is already pursuing like Project Explore, a middle school initiative for high-performing students, and Launch (formerly called College Success Advising), which now also serves grades nine through 11.

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Acknowledgements

For additional information on the findings presented here, contact the Houston Education Research Consortium at 713-348-2802 or email herc@rice.edu.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Can you spell your name please?

2. Tell me a little about yourself.

3. Please describe any college prep or access program you're in. *(what interested you in the program?)*

4. What is your career goal?

   a. What do you think you need to do to achieve it?

5. When did you first start thinking about going to college?

   a. *Anyone influence your drive for college? Anyone else? Your parents? How so?*

   b. *Did your parents graduate from college? 2year or 4year?*

6. Envision yourself in college. What are two schools at the top of the list in your mind? *(elaborate?)*

7. Have you started looking into colleges or universities (researching them)?

   YES: what tools or resources have you used to help you? *Describe that experience?*

   a. What <u>information about schools</u> are you looking for that you see as a "good fit" for you? *(What makes those qualities important?)*

   b. Have you talked about college with anyone? *How was that experience?*

   c. How has your college search been affected by Harvey?

   NO: How do you plan to research colleges?

   a. How have your plans to research colleges been affected by Harvey?

8. What advice would you give to other students, things to consider, in the college search process?

9. In your college search thus far, what is an example of a safety school? Example of a dream school? *(What makes X a safety school example and Y a dream school example?)*

   a. What's motivating/driving you to consider the selective Y school?

10. In your own words, how do you define a top/selective school? *Advice you received about such schools?*

11. Imagine that today you are choosing where you will send your college application. How would you choose where to send it? *(leave open) (who or where would you go to for advice?)*

12. In general, how confident do you feel in navigating the college application process from start to finish? *(what makes you feel that way?)*

13. Compared to your peers, would you say you feel "more" or "less" knowledgeable about the college search process? *(what makes you feel that way?)*

14. Imagine you're accepted to a top/selective school. Which challenges might concern you the most?

15. Now imagine you have acceptance letters from ALL schools you applied to. How would you decide which school you'll attend? *(Who or where would you go to for advice?)*

   a. How do you feel about going to a school out-of-state?

16. Turning to finances, what have you considered in terms of paying for college?

   a. Any personal challenges you might have financing college?

Appendix B:
Data and Methods

Before interviewing new EMERGE students, members of the HERC research team met with EMERGE and HISD leaders to develop the research questions and interview guide. To further inform the interview guide, we observed several of EMERGE's after-school workshops to get a sense of the supports students receive. Shortly after these observations, we conducted pilot interviews with current EMERGE students from the 2016–2017 applicant cohort. These three components helped us refine the final interview guide, which was approved by EMERGE and HISD.

To reflect the diversity of students accepted into EMERGE, we purposefully selected high schools with different sociodemographic and academic profiles. We reviewed information on the racial and ethnic composition, the share of economically disadvantaged and first-generation students, the average PSAT score and GPA, and the average EMERGE application score. We sampled two racially and ethnically mixed schools as well as two majority Hispanic schools; schools that were racially and ethnically mixed had similar demographics to HISD and tended to have higher levels of academic performance in terms of PSAT scores, GPA, and EMERGE application scores. Due to small sample sizes, we were unable to sample any majority black schools.[6] Our goal was to avoid sampling only high-performing schools, as such schools likely already have a more established college-going culture. Figure 1 describes the four schools we sampled.

Figure 1. Characteristics of the Four Schools from Which We Interviewed EMERGE students

School A	School B	School C	School D
■ Racially & ethnically mixed ■ Higher-performing	■ Racially & ethnically mixed ■ Higher-performing	■ Majority Hispanic ■ Lower-performing	■ Majority Hispanic ■ Lower-performing

We interviewed 19 students at the EMERGE Orientation on April 28, 2018. We then interviewed the remaining seven students who did not attend the orientation within the next two weeks at their respective high schools. We used a semi-structured interview guide that included 16 questions and required students to bring signed parental consent and student assent forms. As a token of appreciation for their participation, we provided students a snack during the interview. A professional service transcribed the interviews, which we reviewed for typographic errors. We then coded the interview transcripts based on emerging themes using Atlas.ti software.

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6   For school selection, we sampled schools with a minimum of seven newly-admitted EMERGE students so that we could paint a detailed portrait of each school. We did not sample majority black schools because no schools met this minimum criterion.

Mission

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